

THE HISTORICAL CRITICAL METHOD IN THE LIGHT OF LUTHERAN THEOLOGY

I

INTRODUCTION

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A subcommittee acting for the entire program committee planning this Council of Presidents and Seminary Faculties Conference requested a treatment of the topic "The Historical Critical Method in the Light of Lutheran Theology" together with an inductive illustration of the use of the method.

It cannot be said that the President and Joint Faculties have ignored or slighted this subject in the past. In one form or another this subject "Holy Scripture and Its Interpretation" has been on the agenda of this conference year after year, and when this group is out of session the CTCR is in session dealing repeatedly with this same matter.

Indeed some of you are probably beginning to feel like Sisyphus trying to push the stone up and over the hill but always doomed to have it roll back down so that we have to make ever fresh starts with little expectation of real progress. The hill in this case consists of cherished and long-held convictions regarding Sacred Scriptures. The rock is the historical-critical method.

We all know that the historical-critical method was once anathema, a traditional whipping boy in the LCMS. Sometimes it was attacked under another name ("higher criticism", for example), but the fact is that revered teachers warned against that new and modern way of handling the Word of God. Now that same method is increasingly accepted, and many suspect some kind of sell-out. The fact that the method is used internationally and interdenominationally does not comfort us, because the truth is not to be determined by how widely held an idea or method may be. And the fact that the Commission on Theology has written a study document defending the use of the historical-critical method among us within certain limits has not removed all suspicion.

The struggle goes on. We cannot yet reconcile in our minds the new method and the old ideas.

Law and Gospel

Why have past discussions not satisfied? No one can possibly know all the answers to that one. And perhaps we will have complete satisfaction in this area as in so many others only on the far side of the parousia. However, I do not care to adopt a defeatist attitude. I believe that progress has been made and can yet be made. More clearly than ever before the Bible is understood in our midst as consisting of Law and Gospel. And more clearly than ever before the very long and honorable history of the critical study of the Bible is appreciated in our midst.

In my presentation I will attempt to speak of the inerrancy of the Bible in relation to the Law-Gospel content of the Bible, and I will attempt to define and defend not only the scholarly use of the Bible that goes back to the ancient church but also more recently introduced aspects of the scholarly method.

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There are many words that might stand as a point of reference for us in these discussions. One that seems particularly apt to me was spoken by John Bugenhagen in his sermon for Martin Luther's funeral. He said:

He was without doubt that angel of God of which the Apocalypse speaks in chapter 14--flying in midheaven with an eternal gospel to proclaim to those who dwell on earth...This angel said, "Fear God and give Him glory!" Those are the two parts of Dr. Martin Luther's teaching, the Law and the Gospel, through which all of Scriptures are opened up and Christ is known as our righteousness and eternal life.

A PRELIMINARY ASSESSMENT OF THE METHOD

Etymology

The words "critical" and "criticism" in "Critical Method" or "Biblical Criticism" are a stumbling block to come. They say the critical stance of some scholars seems incompatible with the reverence required of the believer and preacher.

It is well at the outset to remember that originally the word "criticism" meant simply a thorough and careful analysis of a subject, a critique. Criticism refers to a scholarly and careful as opposed to a slovenly, arbitrary or misguided use of the Bible. The Greek word krinein means not only to judge but also to discern, and then to speak on the basis of that discernment. And a critic is "one who expresses a reasoned opinion" (Webster) backed by close observation, knowledge and understanding.

Such is the primary meaning of the word "criticism." It does not mean to find fault. Criticism is not the practice of radical surgery, amputation and dismemberment. The historical-critical scholar does not sit in judgment on the Word of God, calling this true and that false, and making himself the lord of the Bible.

To be critical excludes being sloppy but does not exclude being pious, faithful and Christian. There have been aberrations among people who use (as also among those who refuse to use) the historical-critical method, but Biblical criticism intends to be and can be a churchly and Christian ministry. The Lutheran exegete who uses the historical-critical method approaches the Bible as a Christian, but means to read this sacred book carefully and thoughtfully and on its own terms. Thus one might defend the use of the word critical on the basis of etymology.

A Tool

The other side of that same approach is to say that after all the historical-critical method is a neutral (that is, not an intrinsically judgmental or destructive) instrument or set of instruments. Actually the method is a complex set of methods: textual criticism, literary criticism, form criticism and others. We might compare these methods of the exegete with the implements in the carpenter's tool box. The hammer, saw, chisel, screw driver, skill

saw and electric drill were developed at different times in history but are all recognized as being useful tools which of course produce different results in different hands. If we do not like the results--saws have been used to cut up bodies--we do not blame the tools but their wielder.

"Scientific"

The historical-critical method grew up out of the desire to use the scientific method, so successful in the natural sciences, in the study of historical documents. The use of the scientific method means proceeding inductively, first observing and then generalizing. It means setting aside or holding in limbo traditional explanations and setting up hypotheses and then testing them. Again, results differ, as different exegetes work with the method. But if one scientist discovers a polio vaccine and another finds a more efficient way to wage chemical and biological warfare we do not fault the scientific method but the scientist. If a particular exegete should announce a theory about a text, and that theory seems hurtful or just plain fanciful, we should not automatically say that he has erred because he used the method. He very well may have erred because he used one method badly or even because he did not really use the method but only asserted that his results rest on scientific inquiry.

Presuppositions

There are some who say the method is really not so much a technique like sawing wood or a scientific procedure like solving an equation as it is an art like painting. And if modern artists like Andrew Wyeth and Andy Warhol use canvas and paints, brushes and palette knives and have in mind notions like beauty and composition and still come up with distinctively differing pictures, then the decisive difference is in the artist himself and in his apprehension of reality - in his presupposition and habitual posture. It has been seriously argued whether exegesis is a science or an art. However, it might be well to remember that the difference between science and art is not absolute. Certainly they are not airtight compartments. Both scientific and artistic advance depend on mastery of the tradition and disciplined effort on the one hand and on accident, imagination and creativity on the other.

In summary, the first point I wish to make is one that has been stated by others in various ways before now. It can be divided into three parts: a) fundamentally "criticism" means being careful and taking pains as opposed to being casual and unobservant; b) the historical-critical method is a tool-box or set of rules and procedures, basically neutral in and of themselves; and 3) unpleasant or negative results₁ arise not from the use of the method but from the prejudices of the users.

An Argument from History

Besides the argument in defense of the historical-critical method based on etymology and the assertion that the method is a neutral tool or set of tools, the method has been defended by an argument from history or a historical observation: the scientific method of studying the Bible is very ancient.

Dionysius

A first example is from the patristic period. Dionysius of Alexandria (A.D. 248-265) provides a good example. He says some of his contemporaries doubt the canonicity of Revelation "for they say that it is not the work of John, nor is it a revelation, because it is covered by a veil of obscurity."

Dionysius accepts the book as orthodox, written by a holy and inspired man but not the same John who wrote the Gospel and Epistles. His judgment regarding authorship rests on an investigation of the form of address, content, vocabulary and style.

He points to phrases such as "life," "light," "truth," "grace," "joy," "the flesh and blood of the Lord," "the love of God toward us," "the commandment that we love one another," "the promise of the Holy Spirit," "the Father and the Son." These are the common coin of the Gospel and Epistles, but they are absent from the Apocalypse.

Furthermore he says that the author of the Gospel and Epistles used the Greek language flawlessly and elegantly, while the writer of Revelation uses barbarous idioms, vulgarisms and in some places solecisms. (Eusebius EH VII 25). This example is useful, lest anyone imagine that our own time is the first period in the church's history when critical questions were asked about the tradition or the first era when churchmen worked scientifically and diligently on the Bible.

Luther

A second example is from the Reformation. Martin Luther gladly used the discoveries and offerings of the humanistic scholarship of his day: the Greek NT of Erasmus (from August 1516), the critical commentaries of Nicholar of Lyra (d. 1340), of Faber Stapulensis (Lefevre d'Etaples, 1455-1536), and of Lorenzo Valla (published by Erasmus in 1505). He supported Johannes Reuchlin in his celebrated difficulties and employed his Hebrew grammar (publ. 1506) and Hebrew dictionary (1518).

We might dismiss Luther's use of these tools as unexceptional and uninformative for our own time. But consider how daring Luther and the humanists really were. Some especially of the southern humanists seemed quite secular to their contemporaries, but Luther, as great a churchman and man of faith as any, did not hesitate to make use of the valid insights and offerings of secular humanists.

Furthermore the official and authoritative version of the Bible was the Latin. It was regarded as inspired and fully authoritative. It seemed to many an impious deed, an act of unfaith, for Erasmus to publish the NT in the original Greek and for people to make such a fuss over the Greek. Was not the Latin version which had served the church for centuries good enough? And Erasmus had the gall to omit from his Greek NT the traditional mention of the Trinity in 1 John 5:7-8: "there are three who give testimony in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit: and these three are one." A cry of outrage went up. The humanist was tampering with the traditional sacred text. Later editions of his Greek NT included the phrase, because a self-appointed defender of God's Word forged a Greek manuscript with the disputed passage. Erasmus had said correctly that no Greek manuscript up to that time

had the three heavenly witnesses and rashly promised to include the words if any Greek manuscript were found to include them.

Today we take it for granted that Luther should have used not only Greek but also Hebrew. But in his day it was popularly said that whoever read Hebrew became a Jew, and whoever promoted Hebrew scholarship was Judaizing. Luther refused to be swayed by such traditional and unscholarly opinion, and publicly took the side of Johannes Reuchlin when that man of letters was being bitterly attacked.

Luther used all available helps critically and freely, transforming and shaping all methods and procedures by his own powerful mind and in the light of his own experience and faith, appropriating whatever aided in the understanding of Sacred Scriptures. He inaugurated a new era in the history of the interpretation of the Bible and one is tempted to call him "the Father of modern Biblical exegesis."

Ludwig Fuerbringer

A third example from just a generation ago in the Lutheran Church--Missouri Synod. Ludwig Fuerbringer in his Theological Hermeneutics of 1924 wrote that "the principles and rules of interpretation must not be fixed arbitrarily. They are included in the general laws of human thought and expression." That is, the rules by which the Scriptures are interpreted are not special holy rules. Why not?

In a footnote on the same page Dr. Fuerbringer wrote the following: Regarding their form the Scriptures are a collection of books written at different times and in various places by different authors, under divers circumstances, for various purposes, and in different languages. In their composition the laws of human speech in general and, especially, the rules of the Hebrew and Greek languages were observed; and the so-called historical circumstances connected with their origin wielded a certain influence upon the form and structure of the various books. For this reason correct Biblical exegesis must be both grammatical and historical.

Thus the historical critical method or Biblical Criticism has been defended and recommended among us by reference to etymology, by comparison with the method of the natural sciences, and on the basis of the church's long experience. I am not aware of any untruth in these observations and defenses, and yet they do not tell the whole truth. There is more to be said. And if we stopped here, we would once again fail to achieve satisfaction.

Before continuing to probe the arguments--especially theological arguments--for and against the historical-critical method, we turn to a description of the method.

A DEFINITION OF THE METHOD

An ecumenical study conference was convened under the auspices of the WCC at Wadham College, Oxford, England in 1949. That conference published "Guiding Principles for the Interpretation of the Bible."

By no means an exhaustive list of each part of each step taken by every modern exegete as he approaches each text, the five elements expounded by the Oxford Conference certainly are fundamental guides and principles. After careful study they also have been accepted and published by the CTCR as "basic and legitimate elements of the so-called historical-critical method."

Those five elements are the following:

1. Establishing the text
2. Ascertaining the literary form of the text
3. Determining the historical situation
4. Apprehending the meaning which the words had for the original author and hearer or reader.
5. Understanding the passage in the light of its total Biblical as well as non-Biblical context.

1. Establishing the Text. There would be no textual criticism if we had the autographs, the actual manuscripts written by prophets, wise men, evangelists and apostles. But we have not a single autograph. We have only copies of the originals, and the oldest NT manuscripts are a few bits and pieces from the second century. Most are much later.

There would be no textual criticism if we possessed only one copy of each of the Biblical books. If we had only a few copies of each, then at least textual criticism would be very simple. But we suffer an embarrassment of riches.

A recent count of our resources for establishing the text of the NT resulted in the following totals: we have 81 papyri, 267 uncial manuscripts, 2764 minuscules and 2143 lectionaries. Besides that there is the evidence of the versions and the church fathers.

If all these many manuscripts and readings agreed with one another, then still, in spite of the wealth of material, there would be no need of textual criticism. We could simply print the text that everyone displays. However, the fact of the matter is that no two NT manuscripts are identical.

John Mill (1645-1707) shocked his contemporaries by printing an appendix to his Greek NT in which he recorded some 30,000 variations from the Textus Receptus. Today it is estimated that there are in the manuscripts available to us somewhere between 150,000 and 300,000 variant readings.

The array of readings is bewildering and would be overwhelming if textual critics had not been laboring for hundreds of years, sorting through the readings and pondering their relationships and worth. That reading which best explains the origin of all the others is to be preferred. This really means that the textual critic must reconstruct the history of a variant reading. A knowledge of the history of the early church, of palaeography and scribal activities, as well as close acquaintance with the Biblical authors, is indispensable.

If we want good and faithful translations, we need reliable texts and therefore, we need textual criticism.

2. The Literary Form. Everyone agrees that the form of discourse called parable has peculiar features and calls for special handling. It seems obvious enough also that some forms reflect a particular origin. For example, a hymn or prayer quoted by a NT writer most likely originated in a worship context. Creeds or confessions of faith were used in one of five different life settings: baptism, and catechumenate, worship, exorcism, polemics, and persecution. Other forms were probably used regularly in other church contexts, such as missionary preaching and apologetics. By studying the formal structure of NT material it is possible to make some educated guesses regarding the original intention of the material and its genesis.

The quotation of the OT in the NT and the subtle allusion to the OT in the NT have parallels in the way NT writers used materials current in the earliest Christian communities. At first there were no books, but there was preaching, worship, church discipline. When the writing of epistles and gospels began, the authors had available not only the OT but also a wealth of existing oral and even now lost written materials. The authors of NT books incorporated OT and early Christian material, excerpting, editing, commenting on that material.

Thus the books of the OT and NT are the end products of a long, colorful a vital history in a living community with its complex relationships and activities.

Form criticism analyzes materials according to form and groups material of like form together for the sake of comparison and theorizes about the typical situation (Sitz im Leben) in which such forms were used. By investigating the form we are sometimes able to reconstruct the previous history not only of that incorporated material but also of the church, its life and its thought.

Tradition criticism is the study of the history of the traditional bits and pieces from the time when they first circulated orally to the moment when they were given a new context in a written documents.

Redaction criticism is the investigation of the unique outlook of the author of each Biblical book. Paul and John and Luke differ from one another in important respects. And, of course, they are very like one another in equally important ways. All apprehend or were apprehended by one Lord Jesus Christ but all have their own vocabulary and style in proclaiming him. All had access to traditions and used those traditions according

to the special needs of their audiences.

Thus, form, tradition, and redaction criticism include the notion that some parts of the Bible grew, to use a biological metaphor. They grew to their present proportions as the final author quoted or incorporated traditional material--without modern quotation marks or footnotes--into his epistle or gospel.

Literary criticism refers to analysis of the written documents which we possess. It analyzes the present structure of a document. It compares one document with another. One of the most enduring and significant results of NT literary criticism is the theory that accounts for the relationships among the synoptic gospels. It seems clear that some kind of literary dependency exists among Matthew, Mark and Luke. The simplest and most likely explanation is that Mark was the first gospel to be written down. Mark was then used by Matthew and Luke as they wrote, freely incorporating large chunks of Markan material in their gospels. Matthew and Luke did not know one another's writings but they also had a second written source in common besides Mark, and that document is called Q. In addition Matthew and Luke preserve tradition peculiar to themselves and for short we designate the special Matthean material "M" and Luke's we call "L".

3. The Historical Situation. It is necessary to uncover the original setting of the document. Who was its author, and who and where and in what circumstances were his readers? The Biblical word is tailored to the original audience. It was originally, primarily addressed not to us but to them, not to men of the 20th century but to men who lived from 19 to 30 centuries ago. And it was not addressed to all of them but to very specific persons. The man named Philemon received a different impression from the epistle that now bears his name from that which we get.

If we are to eavesdrop on Philemon and read his letter over his shoulder, if we are to stand in his shoes and so apprehend the message which St. Paul wrote, we need to know all we can about Philemon and his world. It helps to know about the ordinary relationship between slave and master in the Roman empire. Were there special conditions of life in the Lycus Valley of Asia Minor that shed light on the correspondence?

The more we know of Paul and the more information we have on Philemon, the more we know of sender and recipient and their ideas and social context, the more we are in a position to appreciate this word of Christ's apostle. Every message is culturally conditioned, and his shaped to some extent by its historical circumstances.

Another example, the First Epistle of John is a beautiful and meaningful book. But if we really knew the specific situation to which it was addressed--and the fact is that we do not know the year, the geographic place, the particular congregation or congregations, the heresy or false prophets under attack--if we knew, then the full import of the message of First John would come home to us.

Is the heretic Cerinthus of whom St. Irenaeus spoke? Or was it some other form of gnosticism? Is the author John the Son of Zebedee, John the Elder, or no John at all? The writing is anonymous. It is a jewel which shines brilliantly enough, but it would make an even more stunning impression if we really knew the original setting for which it was cut and polished. The historical-critical method insists that we not be indifferent to history but do our best to recover the historical situation of Israel and the church. That includes studying the history of Mesopotamia and Egypt, Greece and Rome. It means investigating the ideas and customs mentioned in the Biblical writings on the basis of the best available information which historical scholarship has to offer.

4. Apprehending the Original Meaning. The books of the Bible spoke directly to the men and women who first received them. But we are separated from the original recipients by great gulfs. It is not just that we live at a distance of 2000 years and 5000 miles from the world of the NT. We live in a church with a Gentile rather than a Jewish majority, as part of the world-wide Christian movement that is respected and powerful and has 800,000,000 members rather than in an embattled and persecuted enclave. We live after Constantine and Augustine, after the ruminations of the scholastics, after the rift between Constantinople and Rome, after the Reformation and Luther, after the beginning of the Enlightenment with its still powerful drive towards clearing up all mysteries and wonders. We live after Copernicus and Einstein, after Darwin and Freud.

Our world is different from the Biblical world and our outlook is different from that of the ancients. It requires a determined effort to think our way back to the first century and beyond into the OT period. Among other things it means learning languages, studying maps, going on a dig, deciphering inscriptions. Only by such an effort of thought can we cross all the gulfs and go back and enter sympathetically into conversation with those ancients. Only by such a laboring and such a crossing can we attain to an understanding of the original meaning.

5. Understanding the Passage in the Light of its Total Biblical as well as non-Biblical Context.

Particularity and Relatedness. A sentence in Paul must first of all be appreciated in all its uniqueness. But then it must be remembered that any passage in Romans is part of the whole letter, and the letter is part of the Pauline corpus, and Paul is one apostolic laborer and writer of the primitive church, and the NT church understands itself and its literary production as the fulfillment and culmination of the OT people and literature.

Furthermore Paul, "a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle" (Rom. 1:1), was also a citizen of Rome with all the attendant rights and privileges that stood him in good stead on numerous occasions. And more. He was also a Hebrew of the Hebrews, and a Pharisee, and a man who plied a trade as a leather worker.

Thus Paul is not only part of the Biblical world but also a citizen of the Roman world and a member of the Jewish-Pharisaic world. The more we know of Paul's total context (or the total context of any other Biblical writer), the better change we have of knowing Paul and his message for us now.

Strangeness and Common Ground. We have spoken of gaps and distance between us and the Biblical world. We have focussed on the strangeness of the ancient orient, on our distance from that world, and on the necessity of historical research.

As we today study the Bible and seek understanding, we are aware also of certain common ground. We are human beings as were all those ancient writers, and we share with them the hopes and fears native to humanity. More than that we live, as they did, as members of the people of God. We are their descendants and fellows in one great continuing community. The Book was not dug out of the sand yesterday like some whitened bone or dry fossil. It has come down to us as the living document of a vital people, as part of a rich tradition of worship and scholarship and life. As members of the Lutheran community we have not only a confessional commitment but also a hermeneutical bridge over the gaps in the insight that the subject matter, the res, the Bible is talking about is the rescue of the lost, the salvation of the sinner, the justification of the ungodly, the resurrection of the dead. The Apology of the Augsburg Confession, referring to justification by faith, says,

This dispute has to do with the highest and chief article of all Christian doctrine, so that much indeed depends on this article, which also serves preeminently to give a clear, correct understanding of the whole Sacred Scripture and along points the way to the unutterable treasure and the true knowledge of Christ, and also alone opens the door to the whole Bible, without which article no poor conscience can have a constant, certain consolation or know the riches of the grace of Christ. (Apol. IV 2-4)

Consider the sentence, "I use the historical-critical method." Who is this "I"? I who am human, sinner, baptized into the people of God, ordained into the Lutheran clergy. "I" trust the promise in Jesus Christ, and I, thinking and viewing reality and sacred scripture soteriologically, use the historical-critical method.

THE HISTORICAL CRITICAL METHOD IN ACTION

The best way to find out about the historical-critical method is to use it, and therefore smaller groups will work on some familiar Gospel texts, applying to them the guiding principles we have discussed.

Each group is asked to record its reactions positive and negative, its comments, questions and observations, and submit them before adjourning for lunch. Over the lunch hour they will be collated. A report will be heard after lunch.

Many questions are offered in each following section as examples of historical-critical inquiry. The list is illustrative, not exhaustive. The small sections at the Conference will discuss only the designated select questions from among those offered.

We will concentrate on these narratives about Jesus:

1. Jesus' entry into Jerusalem
Matt. 21:1-9; Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:28-38; John 12:12-19
2. The cleansing of the Temple
Matt. 21:10-17; Mark 11:11, 15-19; Luke 19:45-46; John 2:13-22
3. The cursing of the fig tree
Matt. 21:18-22; Mark 11:12-14; 20-26
4. The anointing at Bethany
Matt. 26:6-13; Mark 14:3-9; (Luke 7:36-50); John 12:1-8

The suggested questions and exercises are by no means exhaustive. They are simply a small sample selected for the purpose of illustrating some facets of the historical-critical method. Record your findings.

1. Establishing the Text

KJV, RSV, NEB, and TEV differ in their handling of many verses in the selected pericopes:

Matt. 21:3 (compare Matt. 21:3 and Mark 11:3 in RSV).

*Matt. 21:7

*Matt. 21:12

Mark 11:19

Mark 11:26

John 12:8

However, study only Matthew 21:7 and 21:12. Check the footnotes in the Greek text and in translations of the passages. Compare the translations. How do RSV and TEV handle the problem in Matthew 21:7? What appears to stand behind the variations in the Greek texts? What is the correct reading in each of these cases? How shall we decide? What difference does it make?

2. Literary and Form Analysis

The pericopes here under study offer numerous possibilities in the area of stylistic, literary or formal characteristics. Of the following, work only on numbers 2, 4, 6, and 7.

1. How do these verses or parts of verses differ formally?

Matt. 21:1
21:2-3
21:9b

- *2. Compare Matt. 21:4 with 1:23; 2:6f, 15, 17f, 23; ~~4~~:14-16; 8:17; 12:17-21; 13:35; 27:9f. Contrast it with Matt. 3:3; 4:6; 21:16.
3. Compare Matt. 26:1a with 7:28; 11:1; 13:53; 19-1.
- *4. Compare Matt. 26:1-2 with Mark 14:1-2. How do you account for the difference in wording? (Compare also Matt. 26:15 with Mark 14:11).
5. Compare Matt. 26:10-13; Mark 14:6-9; John 12:7-8. How do you account for the differences?
- *6. Compare Matt. 21:1-9; Mark 11:1-10; Luke 19:28-38; John ~~12~~:12-19. How do you account for the similarities?
- *7. Compare Mark 11:12-14 and Luke 13:6-9. Are they related not only thematically but also genetically?

3. Determining the Historical Situation

Discovering the historical place of the matter of the pericopes is a complex task, since we must ask about the historical circumstances of the original events and about the circumstances of the one who wrote about those events. For example, the works and words of Jesus had one context in Jesus' life, had a second context in the life of the earliest Christian community as those works and words were recounted in a variety of settings, and held yet a third place when they were placed into a gospel as a written record.

a. Sequence of Events

1. Entry into Jerusalem 2. Cleansing of Temple 3. Anointing of Jesus 4. Cursing of the fig tree 5. Withering of the fig tree.

Read the pericopes carefully for notes of time. In the spaces beneath each Gospel jot down the events in the sequence which the evangelist has given them and record the chapter and verse that leads you to your conclusion. Record your reactions to anything unusual or difficult.

Matthew	Mark	Luke	John

b. Luke 19:39-44. What might the mention of "Pharisees" (cf. Matt. 21:15) and the detailed description of the siege of Jerusalem tell about the time, situation, and outlook of Luke and his readers?

c. How many animals were involved in Jesus' entry? Compare Matt. 21:2-7 with Mark 11:2-7. Why is there a discrepancy here? Compare the wording of Matt. 21:5 and that of John 12:15. Can you account for the difference?

4. The Meaning of the Words

Words and idioms, like money, have a different purchasing power in different eras. The following is a minimum list of terms to which the exegete must give his attention as he approaches our pericopes. Study only numbers 4, 9, and 14.

1. Bethphage and Bethany. Where are they? Why is Matt. 21:1 different from Mark 11:1 and Luke 19:28?
2. ho kyrios Matt. 21:3; Mark 11:3; Luke 19:31 (cf. kyrioi in Luke 19:33). How should the word be translated?
3. Who or what is "the Daughter of Zion"? John 12:15; Matt. 21:5.
- *4. "Branches of palm trees" John 12:13. Compare this phrase in Greek and English with Matt. 21:8; Mark 11:8; Luke 19:36. What is the significance of the difference? What additional information might you need in order to come to a conclusion?
5. What is the meaning of "Hosanna" Matt. 21:9,15; Mark 11:9; John 12:13? Compare Luke's wording.
6. Why is David called "our Father" in Mark 11:10 and Acts 4:25 (cf. 2:29) and nowhere else in all the NT and contemporary Judaism?
7. What do you make of the difference among "Son of David" (Matt. 21:9; cf Mark 11:10), "the King" (Luke 19:38) and "The Prophet" (Matt. 21:11)? Deut. 18:15-18; John 1:19-24.
8. What was the social and religious function of "the money changers" Matt. 21:12; Mark 11:15? What did cleansing of the Temple signify? (Jer. 7:11; Zech. 14:20-21; Mal. 3:1-5; Ps. 69:9)
- *9. What was ordinarily the condition of the leaves and fruit of fig trees in Palestine at Passover? Matt. 21:20-21; Mark 11:20-21. On Israel as figs or a fig tree and on the judgment of the last days as the withering of a fig tree: Jer. 24; 29:17; Hosea 2:12; 9:10; Is. 34:4; Micah 7:1.
10. Pharisees Luke 19:39. What was their role in society, and how do these opponents of Jesus differ from the "chief priests and scribes" Matt. 21:15?
11. What is the meaning of "heaven" Luke 19:38?
12. What kind of perfume of nard is pistikos? Note the ambivalence in TEV: Mark 14:3 and John 12:3.
13. How much is a "pound" (of ointment) John 12:3?
- *14. Ointment, anointing Matt. 26:7,9,12; Mark 14:3,5,8; John 12:3, cf. Luke 7:37-38. Who anointed Jesus? What part of his anatomy? What did it mean to the anointer? to Jesus? to the evangelists?

5. The Total Context

Three major events are recounted in our selected pericopes: the entry into Jerusalem, the anointing of Jesus, the cleansing of the Temple. We concentrate here only on the entry.

In order to understand the intention of the evangelists, we must study the accounts in their total Biblical and extra-Biblical context. What did the evangelists see in Jesus' actions? What does each evangelist proclaim about Jesus? How does each evangelist choose words and use allusions to drive home the particular points he has in mind?

One of the ways in which the exegete endeavors to answer such questions is to study the relevant OT and intertestamental passages. An excellent set of such passages is given in the margins of the Nestle Greek NT and in the footnotes of Aland's Synopsis. Concordance, commentaries, Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias lead to many others.

In connection with the entry check the following references:
(record your thoughts about the message of the evangelists in the light of those passages.)

The Mount of Olives: Zech. 14:4

The ass: Zech. 9:9; Gen. 49:11. Interesting for contrast are some of the words of the Bible on the horse: Deut. 17:16; 1 Sam. 8:11; Ps. 20:7; Esther 6:8-11; Gen. 41:43.

Entrance and Acclamation: Is. 62:11; Zech. 9:9; cf 2:10; Is. 35:4; 40:9-10; Gen. 14:17-20; 1 Sam. 18:6. Hosanna: Ps. 118:25; cf 2 Sam. 14:4; Ps. 20:7-9.

Strewing garments: 2 Kings 9:13

Waving branches: Lev. 23:40; 2 Macc. 10:6-8; 1 Macc. 13:51-2; Rev. 7:9.

Understanding the text.

What message does Matthew 21:1-9 have for Christians today?

What process do you follow as you formulate the message of a Biblical text for use today?

II

THE HISTORICAL CRITICAL METHOD IN THE LIGHT OF LUTHERAN THEOLOGY

As we used the historical-critical method on our selected texts, we obtained certain results that might appear to be negative:

- a) The Evangelists disagree concerning the chronology of Jesus' last days.
- b) The Gospels vary concerning the words Jesus spoke in our pericopes.
- c) The Gospels differ concerning the number of animals commandeered by Jesus and other details in the narratives.
- d) Especially the Synoptic Gospels have much in common, because Matthew and Luke apparently used Mark in their own compositions. Yet the Evangelists differ in what they emphasize about Jesus in these and other pericopes:

Mark: In keeping with the oblique way in which his Gospel witnesses to Jesus' dignity, Mark in his account of the entry is rich in suggestion but very reserved. There is no explanation of the fact that the new colt is ready and waiting. Jesus rides toward the city from the Mount of Olives, but there is no quotation of Zechariah. A shout goes up, but it comes evidently from the band of disciples and followers of Jesus and not from a great urban multitude. Furthermore the enthusiastic words recognize the nearness of the kingdom but do not give "full-throated Messianic homage" to Jesus. The cry is "almost Messianic" but not quite. Apparently the demonstration died down before he actually reached the city.

Matthew: Jesus rides into the city, meek and humble, explicitly fulfilling Scripture down to the last detail. Only Matthew and John actually quote Zechariah's prophecy. Crowds clearly and unambiguously proclaim Jesus the Messiah, the long-awaited Son of David, Ruler of God's people in the last times. And the whole city was stirred by his coming.

Luke: Jesus is called "the king who comes in the name of the Lord," but the kingship of Jesus is not emphasized so much in Luke as in John. The dignity of Jesus is underscored by the fact that his disciples lifted him and set him on the colt. His ministry and mighty works cause people to echo the words of the angels who greeted Jesus' birth: "Peace in heaven and glory in the highest." Others besides disciples were in the multitudes, and Jesus himself spoke out in support of the acclamation he received.

John: Freshly anointed, Jesus comes to Jerusalem as king. The notion of meekness is omitted from the Zechariah passage. Jesus is fully in charge and secures the necessary animal by himself. As he nears the city crowds with palm branches come

out from Jerusalem to greet him, and the procession takes on a distinctly triumphant and royal character. He is acclaimed King of Israel.

On the face of it, these observations about the unity and uniformity of the Biblical accounts might possibly seem to be negative. They appear to call into question cherished views about the Bible. They seem to say things about the Bible that our fathers did not say. Some people today hold that one part of the Bible does not and indeed cannot contradict another part even in matters of arithmetic, chronology, or geography. To such persons the conclusions of the historical-critical method seem negative.

However, it is important to ask in what sense these observations are negative. They are not negative in the sense of showing insufficient respect for the Bible. Indeed these conclusions result from a minute and painstaking respect for what the Bible actually says. The exegete has too high a regard for the Bible to pretend that the Bible says what it does not say or does not say what in fact it does. In other words exactly when the exegete confronts us with so-called negative results he is actually related in a most positive manner to the Bible itself, because he is letting the Bible speak for itself against theories and opinions of men who wish that it spoke otherwise.

To put the matter yet another way, the exegete is in the habit of proceeding inductively rather than deductively. He does not come to the texts with a ready-made set of doctrinal conclusions which the texts must at all costs support. He is not interested in merely illustrating or decorating a preconceived theological system with choice Biblical passages. He is in the business of looking and listening, observing and scrutinizing, reading and comparing, and then setting down as honestly as possible what he discovers. When he discovers discrepancies or difficulties, he should not be accused immediately of manhandling or manipulating texts. He only finds them; he does not create them.

The myth that the historical-critical exegete is playing fast and loose with the Bible dies hard. But it should be laid to rest. The fact is that the exegete is committed to compelling himself and others to live with the real Bible rather than the Bible of his own or anyone else's dreams. In the process he may make himself and others uncomfortable, but if he is honest, he will require better and stronger reasons than that to cease and desist his labors.

Legitimacy

Certain questions demand to be faced: How can it be that the Lutheran exegete is willing to live with historical, geographical or numerical conclusions that are in some sense negative? In the light of Lutheran theology is the historical-critical method, which experience has shown to yield such negative results, legitimate? In attempting an answer, we focus first of all on certain verses that have been prized and rightly so by our Lutheran tradition.

- a) "I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that He was buried, that He was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures, and that He appeared to Cephas, then to the twelve."
(1 Cor 15:3-5)
- b) "God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation. So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us."
(2 Cor 5:19-20a)
- c) "Men of Israel, hear these words: Jesus of Nazareth, a man attested to you by God with mighty works and wonders and signs which God did through him in your midst, as you yourselves know--this Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men. But God raised him up, having loosed the pangs of death, because it was not possible for him to be held by it...(Acts 2:22-24)...Let all the house of Israel therefore know assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified (36). Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit." (38)
- d) "You know the word which God sent to Israel, preaching good news of peace by Jesus Christ (he is Lord of all), the word which was proclaimed throughout all Judea, beginning from Galilee after the baptism which John preached: how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; how he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him. And we are witnesses to all that he did both in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree; but God raised him on the third day and made him manifest, not to all the people but to us who were chosen by God as witnesses, who ate and drank with him after he rose from the dead. And he commanded us to preach to the people, and to testify that he is the one ordained by God to be judge of the living and the dead. To him all the prophets bear witness that every one who believes in him received forgiveness of sins through his name."
(Acts 10:36-43)
- e) "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name."
(John 20:30-31)

In these and many other beloved passages two things relevant to our present discussion are emphasized: 1) the saving activity of God in history in Jesus Christ and 2) God's proclamation to us in a message. We read about historical events and about proclamation on the basis of those events.

It's a long history, for the deed of God in Jesus was "according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God" or "according to the Scriptures." Indeed what God effected in Jesus and offers in the message is "from the foundation of the world" (Matt. 25:34). But it was all worked out and spoken out climactically in Jesus of Nazareth, in a specific individual at specific coordinates of time and place.

History and a book, deeds and words, long ago and far away. If our reflection on God's chosen way is to be shaped not arbitrarily but conformably to the contours of that way, then our study will be historical and literary. To despise historical and literary study is to balk at the way God Himself has chosen. In other words and positively the historical-critical method tries to take seriously the fact that God moved into history and the fact that that movement produced a book. The book is rooted in the ancient orient. Scholarly approach to the book through the use of the best historical and literary tools available is legitimized by God's deed and speech.

Francis Pieper in a discussion of the ministerial use of reason writes as follows:

This usus ministerialis of reason as a tool to hear, apprehend, and ponder the words of Scripture includes also the observance of the laws of language (grammar) and the laws of human thinking (logic) as used in Scripture, for God has adopted the human tongue and the human manner of thinking. God has deigned, as Luther⁹ again and again reminds us, to 'become incarnate' in Scripture.

That has been repeatedly emphasized. For example, Oscar Cullman has written that "anyone who underestimates the necessity and the role of philological and historical exegesis in the first place proves that he has a false theological conception of the nature of biblical revelation." He writes that "the Biblical revelation in both Old and New Testaments is a revelation of God in history, in the history of the people of Israel which found its achievement in the incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth and worked itself out through the history of the primitive community." Cullmann goes on, as some apparently do not, to focus on the shape and form of Jesus' humanity, pointing not only to history and the incarnation but also to the scandal of the cross as presupposition for understanding the nature of God's revelation through Jesus and through the Bible.¹⁰

This last--the specific character of the humanity of Jesus--needs to be underlined, because no one denies that some kind of historical and some kind of literary endeavor is helpful or legitimate. But some apparently insist that both the history and the words have been preserved from the contamination of every error, and therefore we need a special method, a Biblical hermeneutic quite different from every other historical and literary method. Exegetes however are saying that their method is not some special method with special rules, not a sacred method with sacred or peculiar rules; for the activity was in ordinary history on the ordinary dirt under ordinary skies and the words that testify are the ordinary language of Hebrews and Greeks.

Exegetes can be heard to say that they approach the Bible just as they approach every other book. Why do they do that? Isn't the Bible a special, indeed a unique, nay a holy book? Isn't it different in every way from other books--different in origin, different in plan and language, different in history of transmission and use, different in conceptions and content? We are up against a difficult and subtle question here. The Bible is certainly different. It is unique. It is Sacred Scripture and Holy Bible. But in what respect?

Relevant here is a word of Paul:

God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are.

(1 Cor. 1:27-28)

The Apostle continues by describing his own apostolic words:

I was with you in weakness and in much fear and trembling; and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power, that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.

(1 Cor. 2:3-5)

Luther understood Paul. Luther began his thinking and speaking about God not with theories about God, nor with traditional doctrines, nor with reasonable, philosophical notions of truth. That was the high and mighty way of the medieval and scholastic opponents of Luther. Nor did Luther begin with the pious feelings in his breast. That was the anthropocentric way of his radical, spiritualist opponents.

Luther began below--and the Lutheran Confessions begin below--not only with the facts of history but with the lowest moment of all and the most contrary moment of all, the cross.

In the theses and proofs prepared for the Heidelberg Disputation of 1518, Luther says that a man does not even deserve to be called a theologian if he derives his ideas about God from the constitution of the universe and declares on the basis of his natural observations that God is obviously wise, just, good, and powerful. On the contrary he only deserves to be called a theologian who recognizes God in the humility and shame of the cross. "True theology and recognition of God are in the crucified Christ" (Proof 20).¹¹

Luther reads the Christmas narratives from the point of view afforded by the cross. He refers in his Christmas sermons repeatedly to the gracious contrariness of our God, who acts not in displays of overwhelming power and flashes of glory but in the child. And the child is described not merely as human, but as humble, helpless at his mother's breast, asleep in a crude stable in the company of poor beasts of burden, ignored by the wise of the world.

As Luther, Pieper, Cullmann and many others have pointed out, there is a parallel between our understanding of the Bible and our understanding of the incarnation, our understanding of the two natures in Christ. The question is raised: how shall we do justice to the divinity or deity or sacredness of the Bible? Or the assertion is advanced that historical-critical study does not do justice to that sacredness. The question or assertion is loaded with a presupposition about what deity is, namely that God is omniscient, omnipresent, just, changeless, eternal, truthful, independent and sovereign. The trouble with such definitions or descriptions of deity is that they fail to mention that specific characteristic on which everything depends: God's mercy, His love, His will to pardon. The familiar aforementioned majestic attributes can equally as well be ascribed to the hidden God, the God of wrath.¹²

Or those attributes could equally as well be ascribed to the God of the philosophers, which is by no means the same as the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. St. Augustine in his Confessions (VII, 9) wrote that he could find in Plato the divinity of the Eternal Word but he could not find the humility of the Incarnate Word.

[Taking seriously the otherness, the sacredness, the holiness of the Scriptures means in the Lutheran Confessional sense to take seriously the mercy, to take the Bible seriously as the word of absolution, even though it is addressed to men in words which are not only human but weak, impotent and foolish. It means clinging to the gracious word of promise even though that word comes in such lowly garb. We have the heavenly treasure in a thoroughly earthen vessel, but we rejoice in the treasure and are not offended at the vessel. The historical-critical method is compatible with the theological recognition that the Bible is not only a historical and literary document but one that has the form of a servant and has not been spared the ordinary marks of other servants.

Suspicion arises concerning the presuppositions of those who categorically reject the historical-critical method. Denying in advance, a priori, the use of the generally accepted historical methods seems to mean taking offense at the manner chosen by God to come and redeem. To insist and demand that we must have a human and historically perfect Bible is to cast one's vote for a theology of glory and power, not a theology of the cross. It is to seek a beauty and a perfection that conform to standards alien to the cross.

Where have people learned their definition of perfection or truth? Where in Scripture or the normative Lutheran tradition do we hear or read that truth means perfect accuracy in all matters of history, geography, and arithmetic? The accuracy, truth, perfection of the Bible is not of the sort that can be seen by just anyone or proved to just anyone. Hermann Sasse has said that some "artful attempts to harmonize make of the Bible a book that corresponds to our human ideals of a perfect book". He continues,

They ignore what Scripture itself claims to be: God's Word veiled in man's word. It has pleased God the Holy Spirit to give us His Word in the form in which men of an ancient time and of an ancient culture wrote history, placing several accounts of the same event next to one another, without worrying about differences; using quotations that by our standards are not verbatim; offering numbers that are not to be taken as literally accurate statistics; presenting events that lie beyond human experience, for example, the protological (the creation story) and the eschatological expressions of the Bible, in pictorial language rather than in rational expressions.¹³

The Bible indeed has perfection, strength, authority, beauty. But the perfect wisdom and power of the Bible can be perceived by faith alone precisely because they are hidden under the cross, precisely because "Jesus Christ and him crucified" is the Bible's wisdom and power, and he is foolishness and weakness to any eye but the eye of faith. The eyes to behold him are those which have been enlightened by the Holy Spirit.

To claim that the holiness or otherness or uniqueness of the Bible consists in its having been preserved miraculously from the honest limitations of honest finite men and in its extraordinary accuracy in matters of geology and geography, astronomy and physiology would seem to miss the essential point of the Lutheran Reformation, because there is nothing Christocentric or soteriological in such an approach. Yet that non-soteriological way is the one that some people travel as they fill up terms like "inspired," "inerrant" and "infallible" with specific contents. If the exegete with his findings runs counter to such un-Lutheran definitions, his work should be called not negative but iconoclastic, since he is breaking up a cherished idol, and that kind of work has a long and honorable history.

There is a point here worth pursuing. The exegete is usually thrown onto the defensive, compelled to demonstrate again and again his loyalty to central Lutheran affirmations. It is demanded that he show the compatibility between the method which has proved so helpful to him and the Confessions to which he has pledged loyalty.

However, if he is correct in his assertion of that compatibility, then as exegete and churchman he is also under the further obligation of raising questions about the presuppositions of the rejection of the historical-critical method, and he should press the rejecters to clarify and justify their rejection, if they can. What is the nature of the ground on which the rejecters stand? At first it seems that they are of unquestionable piety and godliness in their affirmations and denials. But we have already given reasons for suspecting that their affirmations are not soteriologically based but spring instead from secular, this-worldly presuppositions about what God's Book should be. And perhaps in some cases all unwittingly the difficulty is even worse than that.

We have all heard the argument, "The Bible says it, and that settles it." "God has spoken in the Bible, and that is all there is to it." We must be extremely cautious here. But such statements, if left without further specification, simply fail to discriminate between the words that God speaks, between Law and Gospel. Such statements fail to recognize that "the transcendent God reveals Himself only as He enters into a personal relationship with man, i.e., God confronts man either as the Lawgiver or as the Law Remover."¹⁴ Martin Franzmann also warned that describing the contents of the Bible simply as "Word of God" is inadequate, because it does not say enough. "The fact that God talks and discloses is important enough, but it does not raise and does not help answer the great question: 'How does He talk to me and what does He disclose to me?'"¹⁵

It is not correct to say that arguments are settled or certainty is attained simply by bowing to what God has said. The reason it is not sufficient is that God has said both Law and Gospel, and these words are different. To say that we must bow to what God has said no matter what He has said is to blur the distinction between Law and Gospel and therefore to forfeit what the Formula of Concord calls the most brilliant light of the Reformation (FC Ep. V, 2; S.D. V, 1). When that light goes out, we are plunged back not into the loss

of religion or into secularism but into the darkness of a false religion, that of righteousness by works, in this case righteousness attained by the work of subjecting oneself to the Bible.

Certainty in the Lutheran sense does not come from bending to the Scriptures pure and simple, bowing to what God has said without further qualification. Certainty and security in a genuinely Lutheran sense come from being terrified by the Law, mortified at its judgment, and fleeing from it as from an enemy to the Gospel. Certainty and security come from clinging to the forgiving love of God in spite of the wrath of God.

Some of the rejections of the critical method seem to rest on the presupposition that the Bible itself, without regard to the distinction between Law and Gospel, is the object of faith and devotion and the source of Christian faith and life. Those who hold such assumptions interpret the use of the critical method as an attack upon the object of their faith. But faith is not directed simply to what God says. Faith's object is the word of promise which contradicts the word of wrath, both of which words are found in the Bible.

Necessity

Is the historical-critical method then necessary? Well, necessary for what? For salvation? Of course not.

People are saved by God's grace in Jesus Christ through faith. No doubt pious people are saved who read the Bible daily without any of the technical apparatus of the scholar. They may think Abraham, Moses and David were contemporaries, and that Paul and James were brothers, but they are saved through trust in the promise of God offered to them freely in Jesus Christ.

Furthermore who would argue that illiterates cannot be saved because they cannot read the Bible, let alone read it critically? Or that infants cannot be saved since they cannot even be told the Biblical story? God has many ways of offering His grace to people--baptism, absolution, Lord's Supper, sermon, mutual conversation and consolation of the brethren (SA III, IV).

The preacher may ascend the pulpit week by week without having cracked the Hebrew OT or the Greek NT, without any awareness of the fact that the longer ending of Mark is not found in our earliest and best manuscripts, and he may still proclaim the Gospel with clarity and power to every creature and thereby be instrumental in their salvation, while the scholar could conceivably be not only an ineffective preacher but even an unbeliever in spite of all his learning.

If the historical-critical method is not necessary for salvation, is it necessary at all? Yes. If in our congregations and schools we want not only to proclaim the Gospel and administer the sacraments but also want to teach young and old about the Bible and the Biblical world, and if in teaching about the Bible we want to be as accurate as possible in our statements and diagrams, in our verbal and pictorial representations of Biblical places, persons and ideas, then we need the historical-critical method.

If we wish to study the Bible and teach the Bible in church and school and seminary, if we wish to increase our understanding of Isaiah and Paul, the Deuteronomic historian and Luke, Moses and Jesus, if we want philologically correct translations based on accurate texts, if we want to know how Abraham dwelled in tents and what

it means that Paul was a tent-maker or leather-worker or saddler, if we wish to trace the process by which the Gospels arrived at their present state, then the historical-critical method is necessary. It is necessary for doing this kind of work.

There is a second kind of work that the historical-critical method performs, and another reason for calling it necessary or for saying that we need it. Against the notion that the historical-critical method is either destructive or dispensable, it is often repeated by exegetes and dogmaticians alike that we need the method precisely to keep the exegete from being arbitrary in his dealing with texts. The method binds upon the exegete a discipline which curbs his perhaps too fertile imagination. It keeps a check on the interpreter's ego. Gerhard Ebeling says: "The purpose of the critical-historical method therefore lies ultimately in the interpreter's self-criticism in view of all the conceivable possibilities of deceiving himself as to the aim of the Biblical text."¹⁶

Pieper mentioned something similar when he wrote, "The first and foremost duty of the exegete consists in holding the flighty spirit of man to the simple word of Scripture, and, where he has departed from it, to lead him back to the simple word of Scripture."¹⁷

It is one of the tasks of the method to aid the exegete in keeping to that Biblical word. Sometimes an interpreter or preacher asks about a text, "But couldn't it possibly mean x or y or z?" The imagination can think of many possibilities. The method acts as a curb to lead the exegete to that interpretation which is the most likely one, out of all the possibilities.

Oscar Cullmann, in speaking of the necessity and usefulness of the historical-critical method, says "we would chiefly insist upon this point--the aim of the historical and philological exegesis is to control the numerous ideas and suggestions which a text brings us and to remove from the interpretation those which do not bear examination." And he writes that "the scholar must regard his own personal discoveries with a pitiless eye, however seductive they may be."¹⁸ The method is a way of being pitiless and unsentimental about one's own pet theories or interpretations.

Now not only the individual Christian person but also the ecclesiastical institution, which likewise has a life of its own and an ego, needs to be checked. The institution like the individual has a habit of falling into self-serving patterns of thought. Institutions are less self-critical and less amenable to change than individuals. The disciplined, honest, critical, methodical working of the exegete, always confronting individuals and institution not with the currently acceptable or popular picture of God and Christ but with the canonical Biblical picture, may be a nuisance, but he is safeguarding the individual and the institution from reductionism, substitution, or the introduction of dangerous novelties. Pieper wrote, "This constitutes the second part of the work of the true exegete: he must be able to expose the abuse connected in ancient and modern times with the 'exegesis according to the faith' or 'according to the analogy of faith'. "¹⁹

The exegete tells us what the Bible does or does not say about the Gospel and about Christ. Modern theologians, even in our own Missouri tradition, may write widely accepted opinions concerning Gospel or Christ. The exegete has an obligation not to be carried away by the wind blowing from the past

generations or reaching gale proportions in his own. He follows methodical procedures of Bible study and continues to insist in a perfectly Lutheran way that "the Bible is the place where Christ proclaims Christ most purely."

Utility

No one would bother to defend the legitimacy or necessity of the historical-critical method unless it had proved to be useful. We have already been speaking of utility in the section on necessity, but here we may turn especially to positive results of the method. In trying to illustrate the utility, the usefulness, the profit of the method, we may compare our situation today with that of Martin Luther. It may be risky, but let us consider the idea that we today know more than Luther did about the Bible. Once again we may be guided by the five elements of the historical method.

1. Text: Luther worked at first with the Vulgate as corrected by the notes of Faber Stapulensis and Lorenzo Valla. As soon as it was available, he switched to Erasmus' Greek NT. But the great humanist himself admitted that his first edition was so carelessly put together that it was "more precipitated than edited." Today we have editions of the Greek NT based on great ancient manuscripts and papyri that were still buried in the sand or in monastery libraries in Luther's day. We know more about the text and have better texts than Luther did.

2. Literary Form: In Luther's day parables were commonly regarded as allegories. Today as the result of the labors of literary and form critics we understand better how to handle and interpret parables, how to focus on the single point of comparison. After the sifting of the papyri we have a better understanding of the letter or epistle form. The same can be said of our understanding of catalogs of virtues and vices, tables of duties for members of households, hymns, creeds and prayers.

Luther's reservations about the canonicity and apostolicity of the Book of Revelation are well known. He could not understand or appreciate that book's wild symbolism. Today we can compare Revelation with a very large body of ancient apocalyptic literature. We know that apocalyptic was a familiar form of writing with a large set of stock images. By making comparisons we can see what belongs to the form or framework and what is specifically Christian teaching. We are not so baffled as Luther was about its meaning.

3. Historical Situation: Sometimes Luther made canny remarks about the historical setting. For example, nobody knows for sure who wrote the letter to the Hebrews. Luther guessed--on the basis of bits and pieces of evidence in the NT--that Apollos was the author. That theory still stands as a very real possibility.

We need only look at woodcuts and paintings executed by Luther's contemporaries, however, to see that they considered Biblical people to have lived in houses like their own, dressed in styles like theirs, used similar implements of farming and carpentry. The Holy Land was in the hands of the Turks, and Luther and his contemporaries had not traveled there or dug there or marched up and down the landscape with compass and surveyor's tripod. Since the Reformation whole civilizations have been unearthed, forgotten cultures discovered, languages deciphered. Today we have atlases, charts, histories, and collections prepared by experts who have dug and documented and put us in their debt.

4. The Meaning of Words: Luther was a brilliant translator, and his German Bible was the great catalyst in the production of the modern German language out of the dialects of the late middle ages. Few people have understood as he did the beauty and the force of words. His diligence in his quest for the right word in German for the Biblical words in Hebrew and Greek is proverbial. He consulted the Elector of Saxony's collection of precious stones when he was translating the names of gems in Revelation. He talked with people in town and market place to get the precise term to describe everyday items and actions. And he availed himself of all the latest results of philological research: the rough and rudimentary Hebrew and Greek lexicons and grammars of Reuchlin, Melancthon, and other humanists--among the first ever to be produced.

Luther's eyes would pop if he could behold the magnificent tools we have at our fingertips today, far superior to anything available to him: lexicons, grammars, concordances and studies which are the products of generations of devoted labor.

5. Understanding in the Light of the Total Context: We have been stressing understanding as apprehending and being apprehended by the essential content of the Bible, the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Who would dare to say that we understand God's grace toward the sinner better than Luther did? We are all still able to be refreshed and instructed by contemplation of Luther's understanding of the Gospel.

Because of his altogether awesome faith in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Luther exhibited a remarkable combination of loyalty and freedom with regard to the Bible. In his 1531 commentary on Galatians he could write that the Scripture is a "Queen" ruling in authority, and "all ought to obey and be subject unto her. They ought not to be masters, judges or arbiters, but only witnesses, disciples and confessors of the Scripture, whether it be the Pope, Luther, Augustine, Paul, or an angel from heaven."

Yet in the same book he wrote,

Christ is the Lord of Scripture and of all works. . . .I care not if thou bring a thousand places of Scripture for the righteousness of works against the righteousness of faith, and cry out never so much that the Scripture is against me. I have the Author and Lord of Scripture with me, on whose side I will rather stand than believe thee.

And he concludes against those who offer proof passages for the teaching of justification by works:

Thou settest against me the servant, that is to say, the Scripture, and that not wholly, neither yet the principal part thereof, but only certain places as touching works. But I come with the Lord himself, who is the King of Scripture.¹⁰

Thus the Bible is Queen, but Christ as Savior is the King. Luther exalted the authority of the Bible over church, council, pope or theologian. The Bible is the pure fountain of Israel. It is the place where Christ preaches Christ, where Christ teaches the Gospel, most purely of all.

In his remarks about King and Queen, Christ and Scripture, Luther seems to be reflecting the distinction between subject matter and words, res et verba, bound together in a sort of one-flesh union and yet able to be distinguished.

It is not the historical-critical method but the Holy Spirit who enlightens us about the subject matter, the res, the Gospel. He calls us and works faith. The historical-critical method has a less exalted task, which it performs well enough. It throws light on the words of Sacred Scripture. And the tools we have today, thanks to the labors of exegetes, are finer and better than those available to any previous generation. By the use of them light has been thrown on many scriptural passages--dark ones and plain ones. Historical investigation is forever refreshing us with new insight and unexpected riches.

A Parallel

In conclusion I should like to draw a parallel between textual criticism and other aspects of the historical-critical method. Today no one gets very upset about textual criticism. It is not particularly controversial. Think what that means. Today a person is permitted to deal in scholarly dispassionate fashion with the series of acts constituting the transmission of the Bible. This was not always the case. Textual criticism was once highly suspect and regarded as a blasphemous occupation. When John Mill published his Greek NT (1707) he was accused of being a godless heretic, simply because he had given in an appendix some 30,000 variant readings which occurred in the MSS and versions available to him. The orthodox or prevailing opinion was that God had providentially guarded the text of the Bible from corruption. That is, God was thought to have given this book a different kind of transmission through history from that which other books enjoy. To say that there were many manuscripts of the Greek NT and to throw into full public view the many differences among MSS was the same as saying that the Bible had come down to us through the centuries just like any other book.

In time, of course, the facts--the observable nonmalleable data--prevailed over the dogma, and textual criticism is now a respected discipline even among very conservative persons. But there is no such relaxed and detached thinking among those same persons regarding the series of acts constituting the writing of the Bible in the first place. There, it is insisted by many, God not only intervened but intervened in such a way that He safeguarded the Bible in the various moments of its conception and birth from the thousands and more calamities that befall other writings at the time of their genesis. And further they insist that that safeguarding has had effects obvious to every intelligent eye.

Thus the history of transmission, once held to be sacrosanct and untouchable, can now be approached scientifically and no one is shocked. But talking about sources and discrepancies among gospels still upsets those same people who are unperturbed by textual criticism. They said and are saying that it is perhaps true that God has not especially protected the transmission of this book, but He did grant it a special origin.

Indeed some say that the Bible must have a special kind of origin in order to be authoritative.

Again, how does God work in history? His activity is hidden under the cross, to be seen only by the eye of faith. Thus while we might expect textual critics to say that God was in no way active in the transmission of the Bible, it is a fact that the Lutheran who freely practices textual criticism can rather say that God was active in and with and under the human work of transmitting the text, but active in such a way that His hand cannot be traced by man's unaided wisdom. And Lutheran exegetes who use the historical-critical method can also confess that God was at work in and with and under the human production of the books of the Bible. The authors of the Biblical books were moved to faith in Jesus as Christ and Lord not by any merely earthly intelligence but by the Spirit of God, and by that same Spirit they were moved to confess their Christian faith in written words. That written, verbal testimony was taught by the Holy Spirit. By the historical-critical method the exegete studies the written words. By faith he receives the prophetic and apostolic testimony.

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Notes

1. Leonard Goppelt put it this way: "Since international NT scholarship agrees in the use of the historical-critical method and at the same time attempts to take the NT writings seriously as kerygma, i.e. as God's address to the Church of our time, hermeneutical principles finally diverge in accord with the ecclesiastical self-understanding of the scholar." Die apostolische und nachapostolische Zeit (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1966) p. 3. See also his "Theological Bible Study" in The Lutheran Encyclopedia.
2. Lewis W. Spitz, Jr. The Religious Renaissance of the German Humanists (Cambridge: Harvard, 1963) p. 257.
3. Ludwig Fuerbringer, Theological Hermeneutics (St. Louis: CPH, 1924) p. 2.
4. Biblical Authority for Today, ed. by Alan Richardson and Wolfgang Schweitzer (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1951) p. 240-244.
5. A Lutheran Stance toward Contemporary Biblical Studies. CTCR.
6. Oscar Cullmann, The Earliest Christian Confessions (London: Lutterworth, 1949) p. 18.
7. See for example C. F. D. Moule, The Birth of the New Testament (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).
8. Vincent Taylor, The Gospel according to St. Mark (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1952) p. 452.
9. F. Pieper, Christian Dogmatics (St. Louis: CPH, 1950) I, 197f.
10. O. Cullmann, "The Necessity and Function of Higher Criticism" in The Early Church (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1956) p. 7.
11. Luther's Works, ed. by Jaroslav Pelikan and Helmut T. Lehmann (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957) Vol. 31, p. 52.
12. Werner Elert, The Structure of Lutheranism (St. Louis: CPH, 1962) p. 229-230; see also F. E. Mayer, "The Soteriological Approach to Christian Doctrine," in The Religious Bodies of America (St. Louis: CPH, 1954) p. 143-178.
13. Hermann Sasse, "Zur Irrtumslosigkeit der Bibel" in Lutherische Blätter 19 (1966) p. 110-112.
14. F. E. Mayer, op. cit., p. 144.
15. Martin Franzmann, "Seven Theses on Reformation Hermeneutics" CTM 40 (1969), p. 236.

16. Gerhard Ebeling, Word and Faith (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1963) p. 428.
17. Op. Cit., p. 360.
18. Op. Cit., p. 11 and 15.
19. Op. Cit., p. 361.
20. Martin Luther, A Commentary on St. Paul's Epistle to the Galatians, a revision and completion of the Middleton edition by Philip S. Watson (London: James Clarke, 1953) p. 260f. (WA 40¹, 420, second edition)